

# MINUTES

## Volunteer Firefighters Recruitment and Retention Task Force

*Date/Time/Location:* October 9, 2019 | 1:00 PM | Legislative Hall 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

*Meeting called to order by* , Rep. Bill Carson

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### In Attendance

**Present Task Force Members:** Sen. Bruce Ennis, Sen. Brian Pettyjohn, Rep. John Larry Mitchell Jr, Rep. William Carson, Rep. Dan Short, Romain Alexander, Chairman David Roberts, Brian Moore, Charles H. Harris, Robbie Murray, Robert Watts, Jay Johns, Warren Jones, Kate Rasulova.

**Present Via Phone:**

**Absent:** Sen, Nicole Poore, Dr. A. J. Schall, Tom DiCristofaro

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### Introductions

Rep. William Carson called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM

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### Selection of Chair and Co-Chair

Motion: **William** / Second: **Brian**

Rep. William nominated Rep. John Larry Mitchell Jr. as the Chair of the Task Force. The motion was seconded, voted on, passed and Rep. William turned the meeting over to the new Chair. The Chair opened nominations for a Co-Chair and Rep. Dan Short made a proposal to recognize Sen. Bruce Ennis as the next Co-Chair. The motion was seconded, voted on, and passed.

The Vice Chair wanted to make sure all attendees had a copy of the House Concurrent Resolution #50 and asked everyone to introduce themselves. He added that he and Dan had been tasked through the legislature to put forward the legislation to establish a task force to help with the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters for the Delaware Volunteer Fire Service. He reminded everyone that the task force report due date is January 1, 2020, approaching quickly. In the event we won't reach our goal by the due date time, we would extend the timeline in order to achieve it. He emphasized that this was an important issue which we needed to address within the extended time. He was also hopeful about coming up with ideas to help the Delaware Fire Services.

The Chair gave the floor to the new Co-Chair. Sen. Ennis suggested to come up with some kind of pamphlets listing benefits and other information about the volunteer services program to spread the word out in order to recruit new volunteers. He also added that the State of Delaware has 60 volunteer fire companies, 21 substations and 3 ambulance stations with approximately 6,000 volunteers serving as firefighters, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT), and support members (e.g. life, auxiliary, juniors, cadets and social).

The State of Delaware offers a variety of benefits to recognize volunteer firefighters, auxiliary members, and EMT's for the sacrifices they make through their volunteer services. The Co-Chair mentioned some of the benefits. Some of them include:

- \$400 tax credit on State personal income taxes each year;
- Membership in the Delaware Blood Bank;
- Participation in a pension plan
- Worker's Compensation for disabilities received in the line of duty;
- A special "Delaware Volunteer Firefighter's License Plate" for personal vehicles; and
- Membership in the Delaware Federal Credit Union.

In the unfortunate event that a service member suffers death in the line of duty, further benefits include:

- Reimbursement for funeral expenses, up to \$7,000;
- Life Insurance payments of \$150,000 for deaths in the line of duty; and
- Reimbursement for college tuition expenses for dependent children.

The Chair took back control of the meeting. Along the lines of the Co-Chair's presentation, he mentioned that education could be another incentive and benefit of the volunteers. He suggested to look into education credit opportunities for members attending, for example, the Delaware Tech fire prevention course and any other similar ones. This would apply to the National Guard or law enforcement whose education opportunities doubled last year. Finally the Chair opened the floor to an open discussion.

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### Open Discussion

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Rep. Carson began by stating that, as a 55-year member of Elsmere, he knows there had been an ongoing concern about the scarcity of volunteers. He believed that the one thing we had shot ourselves in the foot with was doing away with the Convention Parade. Everybody, especially kids, loved the firetrucks and they loved to see it. It was great for us to be out there. The community saw us and that was a great opportunity to create awareness. We need to be more involved in the community and let people see us, be more vocal and get back on track with engagement. While encouraging people at the church to join volunteer fire services, rep. Carson found out that people have no idea about the Volunteer Fire Services right here in Wilmington city is the only paid base in the state of Delaware.

He moved on to emphasize that we need to get back to parades and move around the counties to allow the community to see us.

#### **The Chair posed a question to Warren:**

Do you have access to any information, recommendations/suggestions that other states use regarding recruitment and retention purposes?

**Warren** answered that they had a meeting in August with 7 states and generated some ideas. The handouts that he provided have some thoughts and ideas that were gathered from other people from those states.

**The Chair** requested Kate to reach out to Mark Cutrona and research any legislation/laws in other states, and hopefully, with that information and Warren's information, we can generate some ideas.

**Warren** recommended to conduct research on 3 states: New York, Maryland and Pennsylvania for legislation/laws or bills, including recommendations/suggestions and any information about incentives to recruit and retain volunteer firefighter members.

**Please see the attached DVFA 1<sup>st</sup> meeting presentation for his entire speech. Below I have jotted down a few main points of the presentation.**

Jay Jones, the President of the Delaware Volunteer Firefighters Association had the floor and stated that the volunteer members number is going down. Throughout the whole state we have seen career staff, like EMS staff, paid career staff to help with fire suppression in order to fill that void. Before, we used to have 3 trucks and now, we have 7 trucks with less volunteers which take them longer to get equipment out.

Other states actually look at what we are doing to recruit volunteers, since they too are having the same issue and are trying to curb the problem. A lot of methods other states use are career staff supported by volunteers, which doesn't work well. He suggests that DVF services should be supported by career staff instead, and not the other way around.

The situation is not in any critical stage at the moment, but it's important for us to come up with outside-the-box ideas to help out in the long term. Incentive programs used before gave access to beach and state parks. Those or small gestures like fire companies t-shirts are not working anymore.

As far as requirements and standards throughout the state, the response time requirement every so often had increased. We never dropped services; our services increased and we do a lot more with a lot less time. This has been a big issue since the beginning of fire services in DE.

The climate had changed in Delaware from when we used to have factories, shift workers, mom and pop stores that used to allow their employees to assist with fire alarms. We are not seeing that anymore throughout the state because now we have bigger companies and stores which are not allowing people to go to fires and emergencies.

**We are hoping to get more positive results and a different outcome from this task force. To remember: we have 3 volunteer EMS companies covering Smyrna area, Georgetown area and the big Sussex area.**

**Jay gave the floor to Warren Jones, the Executive Director of DVFA (also please see his full speech on pg 2 of the attached document)**

**Warren** mentioned that every year they met with the governor and this year they asked him to get together a task force to help with volunteer recruitment. He agreed in Feb to do it. They want to have an open process and more agencies involved to get ideas from across the board.

The Department of Education joined the Task Force because of two reasons. The first was that we wanted contacts in schools to communicate with students about how important public safety is. The second was that we wanted to get students interested in a vocational education like EMS's.

They also asked for someone from the chamber (of commerce) because they wanted to learn from businesses how they recruit and maintain people. Maybe they have recruiters that can help us recruit our own volunteers too.

**The Chair** reminded everyone it was Fire Prevention Week and that our meeting was on Oct 9<sup>th</sup> which is the date when the Great Chicago Fire happened in 1871. He gave out 3 more handouts including one with ideas and suggestions, one with a report from Aetna company and one with Elmer's annual report for fire services in the city of Wilmington Fire Dept. and how that correlates to the Volunteer Fire Dept.

Aetna is the 2<sup>nd</sup> business company in the state to respond to more than 3000 fires/year. They also had to deal with recruitment issues and they hired a consultant for that. The consultant got into recruitment retention in the report.

**Rep. Carson** seconded Jay's thoughts on not doing what the other states were doing with career staff and volunteer staff. He gave an example of when he was working as law enforcement in Baltimore and volunteering for fire services, that the volunteers always felt unwelcomed among the paid staff. He was also curious about the new training requirements and how that would fit with the volunteer schedules. There needs to be a way to accommodate the volunteers' needs so they can make it to all the trainings.

**The Chair** reminded everyone that if the media reaches out to any of you please contact the chair and co-chair and/or direct them to the chair and co-chair. He also mentioned that younger people who want to establish a career in this field and would like volunteer, should be encouraged to engage with us.

It was also mentioned that we have a big problem on the SE coastal Sussex area where, due to a large retiring population, we are losing volunteers and need to look more into attracting younger generations that are also established.

**David Roberts** pointed out that young people don't care much about the current incentives; for instance, his two high school children volunteer for firefighter services not because of the benefits but because they like it. What is important to 17-25 year olds vs 45-50 is different.

We have to find a way not only to recruit but also retain young people to get more years out of them. At the same time, we should not neglect the 50 year olds as they too can contribute many years to us.

**The Chair** – to address the pension system not being a priority for a new person coming to volunteer as a firefighter, we could look into different plans and enhancements that can be made in order to make it more attractive; we could then advertise and emphasize these benefits more to people.

Tuition reimbursements and loan forgiveness would be another attractive incentive to volunteers.

One note was mentioned that many of these benefits are for people who are getting paid, who have salaries and their benefits are based off of that.

**Co-Chair** suggested that the State could make a contribution towards the pension benefits.

A concern was raised about the total cost of a pension plan, which would have to consider those who retire and those who are brand new every year.

**David Roberts** mentioned that since the 80's, the contribution has been \$125/month after retirement at the age of 60, which is not enough; however, we could look into compounding that amount annually and then it might be worth it.

A point was made that, in a survey directed toward law enforcement officers who volunteer for fire services, material gains weren't as important as a thank you card.

**David Roberts** added that the County to County parade is still the best way to create interest; also, the pension is not bad but people want and expect something right now instead of many years from now.

### **Next Meeting Selection**

The committee decided to hold our next meeting on Wednesday, 10/30, 1-3 pm possibly in the Legislative Hall. The following meeting would be on the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of November at nighttime to get the public opinion at the fire house. Will discuss more about this at the next meeting.

### **Closing**

Meeting adjourned at 2: 20 pm. **Motion was voted-on and passed unanimously.**

Minutes Submitted by: Kate Rasulova